The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

SUBSCRIPTION (weekly). One year.....$1.00 Canada...$1.50. Other countries.... 2.00

SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 1919.

R. CRUSOE: HIS ANNIVERSARY.

THIS week, two hundred years ago, English fiction was born without the aid of a heroine. Its father was not a young, dashing, romantic fellow, but a man of 60, with a lean face surmounted by a long nose and a wart or two. That is as close as we may come to his appearance, for he never had his picture taken with his chin in his cupped palm, or holding a dog in leash, or starting out for a ride with his publisher. To those who like idealistically to visualize their favorite authors in public, perhaps sipping Chateau Veugeot in the basement of the Brevoort, we will admit that this aged reporter named FOE, or DEFOE, as he called himself, might on one occasion have been seen in the Red Lion Inn at Bristol, buying drinks for a big-footed Scotch sailor named ALEXANDER SELKIRK. Almost everybody who had any curiosity went to see SELKIRK, just as in other centuries men have gone a long way to see the Cardiff Giant or JOHN L. SULLIVAN. RICHARD STEELE, who particularly liked to make these little journeys because his creditors were too poor to follow him, also went to see SELKIRK, and he wrote a few hundred words about the sailor's adventure "so uncommon that it is doubtful whether the like has happened to any other of the human race."

The First Star Reporter.

DEFOE saw SELKIRK in the same light that STEELE saw him, but DEFOE, who was a reporter first and a genius afterward, thought that if SELKIRK's experience was new in human history it might be well worth writing a lot more about than 1,200 words. STEELE had an audience, and a very respectable one, which read his few hundred cold words about SELKIRK and yawned and wondered why DICK had put such unimportant stuff in *The Englishman*. DEFOE also had an audience, but it was disreputable as compared with STEELE'S. This long nosed pamphleteer was not one of England's most approved characters. He had been in MONMOUTH'S rebellion; he had kept a livery stable in London; he had served in King WILLIAM'S army; he had been bankrupt; he had run a tile works in Essex with one hand while he wrote seditious pamphlets with the other; he had stood in the pillory for libelling the Church while an admiring populace had guarded him and wreathed his homely head with flowers; he had been in and out of Newgate at 45, when all respectable Englishmen were preparing for a pious death, and again, ten years later, he had been in prison for libelling LORD ANNESLEY in a political pamphlet. Meanwhile, when not locked up, he had written for *The Review*, had edited *Mists's Journal* and had started the Whitehall *Evening Post*. He had written a hundred political and religious tracts, but only one thing that smelled like fiction—*The Apparition of Mrs. Veal*, a bit of psychic phenomena stuff that caused the righteous to rise and call him faker, or the ancient synonym thereof. MARK NOBLE wrote of him: "He was the darling of the Whig mob and the contempt of men of genius. He disgraced himself by every low artifice as a writer." "Perhaps the greatest liar that ever lived," wrote another critic.

It was on April 25, 1719, that DEFOE'S publisher, WILLIAM TAYLOR, issued the book entitled "*The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner; who lived eight and twenty years all alone, on an uninhabited island on the coast of America, near the mouth of the great River Oroonoque; having been cast on shore by shipwreck, wherein all the men perished but himself. With an Account how he was at last strangely delivered by Pirates. Written by Himself.*"

"Robinson Crusoe," 1919.

Of course that kind of a title would never do nowadays. We can see the publisher shaking his head over it. "Let's call it *Fate's Football*," he suggests, "or *The Castaway*, or *The Island of Surprise*, or *Friday and I*. And let's leave off the sub-title so there'll be room for a blurb on the jacket. Our Mr. VACATION has written a dandy one; listen: 'In this novel Mr. DEFOE has outdone himself. He has revealed the soul of a young sailor who is cast away on a desert island and left to battle with Fate, Savagery and the Elements. It is a big, gripping, virile tale, done as only DEFOE knows how.'"

Having won his point the publisher says: "DAN, for the last time I entreat you to squeeze a girl into the story. Have her willowy, with hair of burnished gold, and have her cast ashore about the nineteenth chapter. Get FRIDAY a sister to act as her maid. Big scene where the parrot reveals to her that ROBINSON CRUSOE loves her. It'll go great."

Handicapped as it was by lack of jacket, blurb and heroine, *Robinson Crusoe* "went big." Its earliest and bitterest critic, GILDON, represented DEFOE as saying to CRUSOE: "I have made you, out of nothing, famed from Tuttle Street to Limehouse Hole; there is not an old woman that can go to the price of it but buys thy Life and Adventures." Somebody has printed a book containing nothing but the names of the various editions of *Robinson Crusoe* that have been issued.

The critics of the day said nothing about the lack of heart interest, but they said DEFOE was the vilest old liar that ever wronged the English language by using it. Think of a man writing a book that pretended to be the true story of another man's adventures, and wasn't!

Poe's Criticism.

The verisimilitude shocked POE, but for another reason. He found it robbed DEFOE of the credit due him:

"Men do not look upon it in the light of a literary performance. DEFOE has none of their thoughts—ROBINSON all. The powers which have wrought the wonder have been thrown into obscurity by the very stupendousness of the wonder they have wrought! We read, and become perfect abstractions in the intensity of our interest; we close the book and are quite satisfied that we could have written as well ourselves. All this is effected by the potent magic of verisimilitude. Indeed, the author of *Crusoe* must have possessed, above all other faculties, what has been termed the faculty of identification—that dominion exercised by volition over imagination, which enables the mind to lose its own in a fictitious individuality."

LEIGH HUNT put a similar thought in other words: "SELKIRK was not CRUSOE, nor did he see the ghost of a human footstep, nor obtain a man FRIDAY. The inhabitant of the island was DEFOE himself."

For all that, the people of Largo, in Fifeshire, home of SELKIRK, put up a statue of SELKIRK and not of DEFOE.

Serious Purpose Stuff.

Old DEFOE said that he wrote *Robinson Crusoe* as an allegory of his own life. We think that he lied about this because he was so moral. He was originally a pamphleteer with a purpose. Having accomplished what would be known at the Lambs as a knockout, he did not wish to attribute the credit to his imagination or his literary abilities, but to his High Moral Purpose. The fact must be that DEFOE, once plunged into the writing of the book, became transported into the character and, as HUNT said, DANIEL himself was the inhabitant of the island. The allegory stuff will not wash. He might as well have insisted that he wrote the story to assist England's merchant marine, for WALTER SAVAGE LANDER says:

"He stimulated to enterprise those colonies of England which extend over every sea and which carry with them, from him, the spirit and language that will predominate throughout the world. ACHILLES and HOMER will be forgotten before CRUSOE and DEFOE."

We believe they will. So also will Mr. WELLS, Mr. BENNETT, Mr. GALSWORTHY and even the Messrs. SHAW and CHESTERTON. It is a dread thing to contemplate, but two hundred years is a long time; and when a writer of mere narrative lasts two centuries and is still going strong there is little hope of wiping him out for a thousand years yet. We cannot hold out hope to any American writer, not even HAROLD BELL WRIGHT, that his works will outlive DEFOE'S. The long lines of handsome heroes and blooming heroines will pass down the aisles of Time arm in arm. The cave men and their elemental impulses will be taken off to obscurity to be cured by the alienists of the future. But the small boy forever will stand with ROBINSON CRUSOE and his kids and cats and parrot and, sighting the savages down the barrel of his fowling-piece, let fly and have the satisfaction of seeing six of the savages fall.

Nobody gets up a bi-centenary celebration of *Robinson Crusoe*. It would be like having a celebration of the *n*th anniversary of the first tree or the first house. It is worth recalling, however, because it reminds us how much has been written, in the way of fiction, since WILLIAM TAYLOR published the first novel of this bankrupt, long-faced reporter. It also reminds us how little fiction has been written that is worth comparing with *Robinson Crusoe*. It led to great things for DEFOE and, having written some more successful novels, he was able to have said of him that he died in poverty. It is accomplishing something to have that written of you, because it means that at one time you had money.

It is a coincidence that the two characters of English narrative who have been most useful were loveless: ROBINSON CRUSOE and SHERLOCK HOLMES. CRUSOE was useful because he directed the mind of youth toward the pleasures of reading; HOLMES, because he is balm for the soul of readers irritated by writers with purposes. It is another coincidence that each had a companion and a goat.

The Librarian's Corner

CONDUCTED BY

FRANK PARKER STOCKBRIDGE.

WHAT IS A LIBRARY?

I KNOW a public library in a good-sized city that, because its trustees happen to be broad minded men and women with sense enough to pick the right sort of a librarian and then let him alone, has become the centre and clearing house of information on every conceivable subject for the people of the whole city. Business men telephone to the library to find out where they can get information as to how to pack hardware for shipment to Peru. Lawyers call up for information about the constitutions and statutes of other States. Even such inquiries as railroad train schedules are not infrequent, so complete is the reliance of the people of the community upon the library's ability to answer any question, whether it is to be found in books or not. Of course the librarian does not know the answer to all the questions asked, but he or his assistants can usually direct the inquirer to the proper place to obtain the information sought. Through such service this library has become something more than a mere handsome building of stone to be pointed out to visitors in the same admiring way that the new court house and county jail are indicated.

Museum, Theatre, Anything!

I know another public library that has become a museum of the fine arts, the best museum in its community. In its galleries are splendid paintings and beautiful statuary; its loan exhibitions draw crowds. People who visit the city in which this library is frequently comment on the architectural attractiveness of the dwellings therein and upon the high average level of taste displayed in their furnishing and decorations; the residents attribute this to the influence of the library.

I know another public library which has an auditorium that will seat perhaps a thousand people, where illustrated lectures, motion picture exhibitions of the higher type, gatherings of the people for the discussion of community problems are held. This library, too, is a living, vital factor in the affairs of its community.

Here is a library that lends phonograph records and perforated music rolls; here is another that every day, in its children's room, has an intelligent and sympathetic young woman read pretty stories aloud to the little ones; here is another library that lends picture puzzles.

All of these and many other forms of activity that have little or nothing to do with books and reading are practised by many libraries in different parts of the country. And because most people judge any institution by its most obvious and superficial characteristics and manifestations many people—perhaps most people—in the towns where the libraries do these things think of the books in the library of secondary interest, if they think of the books at all.

But—Books First.

The problem of the librarian is more complex than that of any other public servant, and sometimes it seems as if, in the effort to solve that part of the problem which has to do with getting people interested in the library as an institution the more vital problem, that of getting them interested in books and reading, were overlooked. For it is the books, after all, that make a library something more than an information bureau, a motion picture theatre, a community centre or an art museum. And nobody gets the fullest measure of value from the public library by any other means than by reading the books which it contains. It is a poor library, indeed, that does not contain books which one cannot find anywhere else; and after all is said and done, all the current fiction and the up-to-date helpful "vocational" books and the rest of them have been got into circulation, the most important of the library's functions has not been performed unless from year to year there is a growth in the number of those who come to it for the real books, the volumes in which men and women have revealed themselves and set down their inmost thoughts, consciously or unconsciously, and through the persual of which the reader can, as by no other means, gain a balanced sense of the possibilities and the limitations of humanity and life.

It is a narrow conception of the public library that would limit its usefulness to furnishing gratis for people who cannot afford to pay such commodities as information and entertainment which the well-to-do can always buy at a price. Every good public library, intelligently conducted by a good librarian, renders, or can render, services that even the rich cannot afford to purchase, and it is in these that it justifies its maintenance as a community institution.